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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 TASHKENT 000355

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [EU](#) [AF](#) [UZ](#)

SUBJECT: (C) UZBEK FM MISSES OPPORTUNITY IN MEETING WITH
DAS FEIGENBAUM

REF: 06 TASHKENT 881 (NOTAL)

Classified By: Amb. Jon R. Purnell, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: SCA DAS Evan Feigenbaum's March 2 meeting with Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov did not live up to expectations. Over three days of meetings with senior Uzbek officials, Feigenbaum had proposed that the Government take concrete steps to improve relations and offered specific suggestions for cooperation in each "basket" of the relationship. Norov, no doubt either following orders from President Karimov or not having guidance to the contrary from President Karimov, failed to offer any commitments, and missed an opportunity to turn a page in relations. The overall tone of the meeting was cordial, with Norov calling for a relationship between equal partners, built on mutually beneficial dialogue and cooperation. Norov ruled out a resumption of high school academic exchanges, but left the door open for university-level exchange programs, and suggested that an American university be established in Tashkent. Norov also informed Feigenbaum that the GOU now accepted a second EU delegation to continue discussions on the May 2005 events in Andijon. Following the meeting, Norov handed Feigenbaum an English translation of its point-by-point rebuttal of the Department's Religious Freedom Report. End summary.

"OPEN AND CONSTRUCTIVE MUTUALLY BENEFICIAL RELATIONS"

12. (C) The overall tone of DAS Evan Feigenbaum's March 2 meeting with Foreign Minister Vladimir Norov was cordial, with Norov calling for a relationship of equal partners based on open and constructive mutually beneficial cooperation. Gone were the accusations against the U.S. for the state of the poor bilateral relationship. However, he added that interference in another's internal affairs was unacceptable. The meeting was the last in a three-day series with senior government officials. Norov commented that Feigenbaum was granted all meetings he had requested. The Uzbek side failed to offer any new or concrete commitments, however. Tashkent's professed desire for improving relations remains

on a declaratory level. Feigenbaum urged the Uzbek government to move from declarations of willingness to cooperate to actions removing obstacles to cooperation in all "baskets" envisioned in the five-year old strategic framework.

13. (C) Feigenbaum stated that he had agreed to visit Tashkent following the agreement on Embassy staffing levels, which had opened up the possibility of dialogue on substantive issues. Acknowledging that differences remained on human rights, Feigenbaum urged the Uzbek government to intensify its cooperation in other areas. Recalling a track record of successful partnership on Afghanistan (in the past), counter-proliferation, and health, Feigenbaum encouraged Norov to build on this record. He suggested the GOU increase Uzbek engagement in areas that had not lived up to their full potential, such as education and trade. Feigenbaum asked Norov to come up with one or two items or activities in these two fields in which to take concrete steps, adding that regional security, counter-narcotics, trafficking in persons, and religious freedom were also possible areas for progress.

HUMAN RIGHTS AND ANDIJON

14. (C) Norov stated that dialogue should not consist of one side as judge and the other as defendant. Norov asked why Uzbekistan was the only Central Asian state taken before the United Nations Third Committee. He stated that the May 2005 Andijon unrest had been a tragedy, blaming externally-based terrorists. Contrary to the media reports alleging that Uzbekistan had refused to accept a follow-up visit by the European Union's Andijon commission, Norov stated that he had

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called German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier on March 1 to invite the delegation to return, if they still had questions. Norov added that he had not yet received a response from the Europeans. Norov also noted that he had read an article published March 1 by prominent human rights activist Surat Ikramov asserting that torture was no longer prevalent in Uzbek prisons. Norov reiterated the Government's commitment to eliminating the death penalty in January 2008. Norov also stated that Uzbek judges are interested in more habeas corpus training, noting that there are only 1,300 Uzbek judges in a country of 26 million.

15. (C) Feigenbaum stated that Washington was perplexed at the Uzbek Government's closure of NGOs working in such areas as agriculture and health and noted that the U.S. could not run programs without implementing partners. Referring to his study of U.S. law, Norov asserted that the U.S. had also prohibited certain types of organizations in the past, specifically communist political groups. He added that NGOs should implement activities in line with their stated goals. He added that "Singapore has no NGOs."

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

16. (C) Norov highlighted Uzbekistan's commitment to religious freedom. He also reiterated the government's opposition to proselytism, which he said was inappropriate in light of Uzbekistan's long-standing Muslim culture, tradition and civilization. He added that proselytizing generates social tension. Following the meeting, Norov handed Feigenbaum a packet of documents which included a fifty page point-by-point rebuttal to the Department's Religious Freedom Report. (Note: The packet was delivered earlier in Russian; Norov handed Feigenbaum an English translation. End note.) Norov also presented an 83 page government-published book filled with essays criticizing the Country of Particular Concern designation. (Note: The publication featured the MFA's November 2006 statement that the Report's conclusions were an unfounded interference in the country's internal affairs. It also included extensive quotes of foreign diplomats, academics and religious figures denouncing the

report's assessment. End note.)

EXTERNAL POLITICAL RELATIONS

17. (C) Norov criticized an interview Assistant Secretary Richard Boucher reportedly gave in Kazakhstan in which he allegedly said that Uzbekistan has troubled relations with its neighbors. Norov claimed that Uzbekistan's relations with all its neighbors are excellent, including with Tajikistan, with whom the borders had been mined to "prevent infiltration by extremists." He justified this by claiming that the United States had mined (sic) the U.S.-Mexican border. Norov dismissed attempts to portray any one country (i.e., Kazakhstan) as a regional leader or "locomotive." He asserted that a monthly pension in Kazakhstan was not worth more than five kilograms of potatoes, and that Kazakh economic growth was entirely driven by oil revenues. Norov praised the "Japan Plus Central Asia" framework as having delivered real benefits to Uzbekistan and the region. Feigenbaum responded that the U.S. spoke of countries showing leadership on various issues in the region but had never anointed one country as the regional "leader."

REGIONAL COOPERATION AND AFGHANISTAN

18. (C) The DAS added the U.S. was trying to develop multifaceted relations with each Central Asian country and taking each relationship on its merits. Feigenbaum then referred to the big, beautiful, new Embassy in Tashkent as once intended as a hub for U.S. regional activities, but that

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it would not be used for that now as a result of our agreement on staffing numbers at Embassy Tashkent.

19. (C) On regional cooperation, Feigenbaum, as he had done with National Security Advisor Ataev and Defense Minister Mirzaev the day before (septel), suggested Uzbekistan could do more to contribute to Afghanistan's stabilization and reconstruction. For a start, Uzbekistan could participate more frequently, at a higher level, and more substantively in regional meetings, such as the recent one in New Delhi, on these subjects. The DAS also referred to the U.S. bilateral trade and investment framework agreement with Central Asian states as an area in which increased Uzbek engagement would meet a positive U.S. response.

TRADE AND INVESTMENT

110. (C) Norov called for greater American investment in Uzbekistan. Feigenbaum responded that American investors speak to one another, and have choices in the global economy. Obstacles to investment must be removed, Feigenbaum emphasized. Norov stated that Newmont Mining "had made good money" in Uzbekistan, and that the time had come to establish the "same rules for everyone." The FM suggested foreign companies should look for investment opportunities in Uzbekistan beyond the oil, gas, and telecommunications sectors.

EDUCATION - NO HIGH SCHOOL EXCHANGES

111. (C) Norov delivered a mixed message on education. Referring to a Chinese loan to equip Uzbek high schools with computers, Norov stated that Uzbekistan was eager for assistance in improving the infrastructure and information technology capabilities of its 9,800 high schools and lyceums. Exchange programs remain a sensitive topic. Norov ruled out any resumption of U.S. high school exchange programs, arguing that Uzbek youth were vulnerable and unprepared psychologically for study abroad. Brushing aside the argument that high school students from all around the

world participate in U.S. academic exchanges, Norov stated that Uzbek students should stay at home with their families until reaching eighteen years of age. (Note: Norov did not mention that his own daughter is a FLEX program alumna. End note.) Norov did, however, endorse a resumption of university-level exchange programs, asserting that older students are "better able to protect themselves."

¶12. (C) Rather than send students abroad, Norov stated the Government's preference for bringing American teachers and institutions to Uzbekistan. Norov suggested opening an American university in Tashkent, along the lines of Britain's Westminster International University in Tashkent (reftel). Citing Uzbekistan's great scientific and academic heritage, and efforts to rebuild an ancient academy near Khorezm, Norov argued that Uzbekistan would be a natural location for American researchers seeking to deepen their understanding of Islam and terrorism, "for which there is no military solution." (Note: The Uzbek government refuses to recognize diplomas issued by the Bishkek-based American University of Central Asia or any universities in Kyrgyzstan. End note.) Norov also asked if the U.S. would consider opening something akin to the British Council (reftel). Norov, however, did not mention the possibility of reopening the American Corners, which were shut down following the May 2005 Andijon unrest, and which Feigenbaum discussed in other meetings. Feigenbaum asked Norov to rethink the GOU position opposing high school exchange programs. He also suggested facilitation of English language teaching in Uzbekistan as a prime area for increased cooperation in the educational arena.

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FM'S MESSAGE FOR SECSTATE

¶13. (C) In closing the DAS, noting he had not heard a lot new during his meetings with senior GOU officials but was encouraged by the atmosphere and was very hopeful the two sides could improve relations, then asked the FM what message he wished Feigenbaum to report back to Dr. Rice. Norov thought a moment and stated, "Uzbekistan is open to constructive cooperation of mutual benefit to both sides as equal partners." At a subsequent reception at the Ambassador's residence, MFA Acting Chief of the Americas Department Tahir Mamadjanov (who also attended the Norov meeting with Feigenbaum) told Feigenbaum the Foreign Minister needed a few more minutes to respond to this question, implying perhaps that the FM was not satisfied with the answer he gave the DAS at the meeting.

¶14. (C) Norov told Feigenbaum the GOU would welcome any ideas and suggestions for cooperation. Pointing to MFA America's Department North America Section Chief Ismat Faizullaev, Feigenbaum noted that Faizullaev had taken notes at all eight of his senior-level GOU meetings and, thus, should have a long list of the specific proposals he had offered to advance the relationship in each "basket." Feigenbaum then quickly ticked through the major areas for cooperation and asked Norov and the GOU to reflect on these specific ideas and to offer their own.

COMMENT

¶15. (C) The Norov meeting was the last of eight during Feigenbaum's visit. The Uzbeks facilitated all meeting requests and the atmosphere for the visit was positive throughout. But while the Uzbeks seem keen to improve bilateral relations, they offered no substantive proposals and agreed solely to energize university exchanges. It may be that President Karimov and the Uzbek bureaucracy require more time to weigh the opportunity to turn a page in relations offered by the DAS visit. We should not expect any sudden or drastic policy changes. President Karimov is

maneuvering with caution, and change will likely be incremental.

¶16. (U) DAS Feigenbaum has cleared this cable.

PURNELL